

TRANSLATING BEYOND CULTURE: My Study Abroad Experience in Chile

by LAURA COCO

W

WHEN I ANNOUNCED TO MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY that I would be traveling to Valparaiso, Chile, to study abroad for six months, the first question they had was usually, “Where?” Chile is a relatively unfamiliar area to most Texans, even to me, but it

was that mysteriousness (and the hundreds of miles of coastline) that drew me to it. After living there for six months, I was able to absorb the history, culture, and language of Chile, and through e-mails home I shared what I learned with my friends and family.

My correspondence home probably sounded as if I was living in constant excitement. Within the first few weeks, I had met the President of Chile and traveled to the driest desert in the world. While in the desert, I went on a six-hour bike ride to see the most beautiful sunset in the world at the Valley of the Moon, but was grossly unprepared with only twelve ounces of water. After arriving at the Valley (and after many failed attempts at buying water from other tourists), I came to a realization that, in hindsight, was painfully obvious: after the sun sets, it is dark. In the small town of San Pedro I was lucky to find a bike with gears, let alone one with a headlight, so I made the three-hour ride home in complete darkness in a single file line with eight other friends. Besides minor mishaps—such as when one person

stopped and the rest of the line came crashing down on top of him—I survived the experience to e-mail the story home and practically give my mother a heart attack.

Becoming the fifth member of a Chilean family was my favorite part of this study abroad experience. I was welcomed into a family as a sister of two little brothers and was encouraged to call my host parents Mom and Dad. They invited me to Friday night movie night, when the whole family piled into the parents’ bed to watch a movie and eat junk food. I gladly jumped right in, literally, making for a crowded bed but a great chance to bond with my new family. My little brothers’ favorite thing to do was to jump out from behind desks, tables, or doors to scare me—a joke that was only made more hilarious if it caused me to spill hot soup. My host dad had a dry sense of humor and loved to discuss politics with me over dinner. My host mom was a full-time housewife who took on all of the responsibilities of the household while wearing high heels and flawless makeup. They treated the language barrier with a sense of humor and patience, and eventually helped me improve my Spanish skills to near-fluency.

When my own parents decided to visit, I was excited at the thought of finally having something familiar in a strange land. What didn’t cross my mind was the fact that, since my dad is deaf and neither

THEY TREATED THE LANGUAGE BARRIER WITH A SENSE OF HUMOR AND PATIENCE, AND EVENTUALLY HELPED ME IMPROVE MY SPANISH SKILLS TO NEAR-FLUENCY.

of my parents knows Spanish, I would be translating from English to Sign Language to Spanish. Although this was exhausting, I was happy to be the conduit of communication between two sets of parents—biological and Chilean. My parents and I visited the School for the Deaf in Valparaiso, where thirty deaf students shared a handful of computers and no textbooks, a sharp contrast to the Texas School for the Deaf, where there are hundreds of students studying in classrooms equipped with cutting-edge technology. The school's director told us that no deaf Chilean student has the opportunity to go to college because the government provides no funding for interpreters. When the students met my dad, a deaf man with a Ph.D., they were given hope for a better future and learned that ... the language barrier increased even more because Chilean

Sign Language is different from American Sign Language. But somehow everyone managed to communicate and understand each other. My parents left Chile with thirty new pen pals and a greater appreciation for the Americans with Disabilities Act.

When friends and family read my e-mails home, they started to wonder if I ever went to school. Although I was enrolled in classes, four-day weekends and frequent holidays allowed me to travel to Chiloe, a haunted island in southern Chile, to Argentina for the most delicious meat in the world, and to La Serena where I star-gazed through the world's largest telescope. I also went sandboarding, parachuting, ate eggs cooked in a geyser, tasted llama, and taught English twice a week to a classroom of forty young Chileans.

Understandably, adjusting to life back in the States was difficult. During the past six months, my "normal" had become spontaneously hopping on a bus and traveling to new cities, meeting new people, and trying new food. To ease back into life in the U.S., I kept in close contact with the friends I made in Chile and shared my stories and photos with anyone who would listen. It is only now, six months after returning from Chile, that I am able to fully appreciate my experience there and to understand how it has enriched my life.

Laura Coco is a senior in the undergraduate program in Latin American Studies. Her study abroad experience in Chile was made possible through a Joe R. and Teresa Lozano Long Travel Scholarship. ☀



Left to right: 1) Surfing one of the driest deserts in the world, 2) Sunset along the many miles of coastline, 3) Taking in Chile's unspoiled natural beauty